



PROGRAM SUMMARY

NFJC Critical Leaders, Thinkers, and Readers Retreat: Civil Discourse in Action

The National Federation for Just Communities of Western New York (NFJCWNY) hosts an annual weekend-long youth leadership retreat designed to develop high school students into informed, confident, and civically engaged leaders. The 2026 theme, Civil Discourse in Action, expands upon previous years' success by emphasizing respectful communication, debate skills, and active listening in an increasingly polarized social climate.

Program Overview

Held at St. Bonaventure University, this intensive residential retreat brings together up to 50 high school students from across Western New York. Participants engage in workshops, dialogue circles, and hands-on activities focused on critical thinking, civil discourse, leadership development, and social justice education. Topics include public speaking, conflict transformation, First Amendment literacy, media bias, and collaborative problem-solving.

Program Approach

- Facilitator-led workshops with experts in civil discourse, literature, leadership, and advocacy
- Peer-to-peer discussions to practice respectful dialogue across differences
- Team-based challenges addressing real community issues
- Mentorship from youth leaders and adult facilitators
- Culminating showcase where students express their learning through creative literary or performance-based pieces

Need and Purpose

In today's heightened cultural climate, young people require tools to communicate effectively, respectfully, and with empathy. This retreat provides a safe learning environment that nurtures leadership, builds confidence, and prepares students to engage constructively in their schools and communities.

Outcomes and Impact

Past retreats demonstrate strong, measurable success:

- 92% gained valuable leadership skills
- 87% committed to continued community service
- Over half improved in critical thinking, reading engagement, and understanding of free speech
- 96.2% would recommend the retreat to peers

Participants frequently go on to serve in school leadership roles, join advocacy initiatives, or return to NFJC programs as youth leaders. Testimonials highlight increased confidence, compassion, and desire to use their voices for positive impact.

Conclusion

The NFJC Critical Leaders, Thinkers, and Readers Retreat strengthens Western New York by developing young leaders who value civil discourse, inclusion, and justice. Continued support ensures that local youth gain the tools, mentorship, and community connections needed to lead with empathy and create meaningful change.